

## A Man of His Times --- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Asia July 13



NSA over the decades has employed countless first-class linguists with a wealth of experience, but, arguably, none had deeper or more varied experiences than Washington Wong. He didn't just live through turbulent times; he himself was caught up in many of the movements and events that roiled Asia in the twentieth century.

“Wash,” as he preferred to be called, was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on a particular president's birthday in 1928. Wash's father was Chinese, his mother Japanese, so he grew up speaking both languages. His grandfather also was Hawaiian-born, but he had business interests in China and took his family to Shanghai when Wash was a toddler. His two sisters were born there.

In 1937, when Japanese forces provoked war with China, the father returned to Hawaii, expecting to bring his family back to the States shortly, and the rest of the Wong family quickly moved to the city of Canton (now Guangzhou) to await their passage to the United States. When a friend with connections tipped them off that Chinese authorities intended to arrest Wash's mother as an enemy alien, the family moved to the Portuguese enclave of Macao. They lived -- and paid protection to local warlords -- from a small stock of gold pieces the grandfather had given them, which 12-year-old Wash wrapped in a belt around his waist. Wash's grandfather died as a result of the arduous travel to find a safe haven.

During their escape to Macao, a Japanese Army officer learned that Wash's mother was bilingual in Japanese and Chinese. He employed her as an interpreter to help solve problems with local farmers; in gratitude for her assistance, he recommended her for a teaching position in Macao.

After the end of World War II, Wash's father returned from Hawaii to take his family back to America. However, as Wash was the only family member born in the United States, he was the only one granted an exit visa. It took a couple of years, but finally the rest of the family was able to join them, thanks to the efforts of Hiram Fong, then a prominent Honolulu attorney, later a U.S. senator from the state.

Back in Hawaii, Wash enrolled in high school and began to learn English. As he recalled, by 1951 he had "just learned enough English to get drafted." He took his basic training at Schofield Barracks.

Not surprisingly, since he was fluent in several Chinese dialects, Wash "maxed" the Army's Chinese language test and was taken into the Army Security Agency (ASA -- predecessor of INSCOM). Once his security clearance came through, he was shipped straight to Korea, where U.S./UN forces were in combat against "volunteers" from China's People's Liberation Army.

In Korea, ASA assigned Wash as an intercept operator in the Low-Level Intercept Program. He carted a radio into the mountains along the main line of resistance and translated plain text intercepted from Chinese front-line communications. Wash occasionally was also called upon to interrogate prisoners. His sergeant for a time, by the way, was Walter Deeley, who later became an NSA employee himself.

When he left the service after 18 months in Korea, Wash was hired as a civilian by ASA, and assigned back to Japan in 1953. He worked in Tokyo for several years, then was reassigned to Okinawa in 1957.

In 1965, when ASA began phasing out billets for employees in East Asia, he applied for a position at NSA. During his employment processing, he again passed the language examinations with highest marks. However, NSA's security organization recommended against hiring him because of his long-time residence in Asia and minimal time in the United States.

But Wash Wong had an influential friend.

Earlier, while a civilian at grade GS-12 in Okinawa, Wash was assigned the job of escorting a visitor from NSA, a certain Milton Zaslow. Milt Zaslow was a GS-16, then nearly the highest civilian grade at NSA, but the pre-visit planning message was inadvertently garbled, and Wash was told to arrange things for a GS-6. Figuring "I was twice as high rank as he was," Wash registered him for a billet in the sergeants' quarters. When Zaslow inquired if this arrangement was a joke, Wash told him that he could get the BOQ after his next promotion.

Things straightened out quickly -- Zaslow was given generals' quarters and a hastily-scheduled courtesy call from the station chief. The next day, Sunday, Wash took his high-ranking visitor out for a meal and the two reconciled. Zaslow, in fact, had been a Japanese and Chinese linguist in government service dating back to World War II, and he readily recognized Wash Wong's talents.

When the hiring problem for Wash became known to him, Zaslow signed a waiver, allowing NSA to bring Wash on board. Washington Wong came to NSA in 1967. Interviewed in 1993, Wash recalled that over the years he and Milt Zaslow became good friends -- "...I don't treat him like a GS-6, though."

Washington Wong was awarded the National Intelligence Distinguished Medal in 1990. Washington Wong retired from NSA in 1996.

Washington Wong passed away in 2012, and was inducted into the Cryptologic Hall of Honor in 2013.

SOURCES: Multiple interviews with Wash and Milt Zaslow.

508 caption: 1) Washington Wong's portrait